Social Capital

**Highlights**

- Social capital encompasses relationships built on trust and norms that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit.
- Social capital fosters collective action to support a public good such as environmental protection, and in some cases is associated with environmental behaviors.
- Social capital facilitates collective action by reducing transaction costs and creating opportunities for exchange of information.
- Environmental education can foster social capital by engaging participants in challenging, cooperative activities, offering the support needed for the group to succeed, setting norms of fairness and open communication, and providing opportunities for participants to partner with community members.

Let’s say you want people in your community to lend their support to a public good, like a city park, bike lanes, or replanting a village forest. You are thinking about educating people on why these things are important, but you doubt that such an effort will make a difference. Over a hundred years ago, Lyda Hanifan, the state supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia, faced a similar problem. His state suffered from poor roads, and he saw the solution as getting rural people to advocate for road improvements. Rather than lecture people about the importance of roads as a public good, Hanifan decided to invite them to “sociables,”
picnics and a variety of community gatherings,” which would build trust and social connections. He bet that “then by skilful leadership this social capital may easily be directed towards the general improvement of the community wellbeing” (Hanifan 1916, 131). Hanifan is thought to be the first person to have used the term “social capital.”

Hanifan’s approach was a success. The social activities enabled rural people to accumulate social capital, which they leveraged to successfully advocate for road improvements. Reflecting later ideas about people as agents who both create and benefit from social capital (Portes 1998), Hanifan noted, “The more people do for themselves the larger will community social capital become, and the greater will be the dividends upon the social investment” (Hanifan 1916, 138).

What Is Social Capital?

Social capital refers to trusting relationships among members of a community that confer direct benefits on individuals and communities. Social capital can be broken down into three components. First is social connections with others garnered through engagement in civic life and voluntary associations. Specific trust for people you know or generalized trust in others is the second component. The third aspect is shared social norms, or formal and informal rules that guide our behaviors (Ahn and Ostrom 2003, 2008; see also chapter 12).

Over the years, social capital has assumed different meanings, varying in their emphasis on community, individual, and society-wide benefits (table 13.1; see also Claridge 2004). Hanifan (1916) used the term to describe how as people engaged in community social events and got to know and trust each other, they became advocates for public goods like better roads. Later, the term was used to describe the ability of individuals to secure benefits, like a job or admission to an elite college, through their social networks (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988). Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam (1995) directed attention to the work of voluntary associations, including those focused on environmental stewardship, in his definition of social capital (Sirianni and Friedland 2005; Klyza et al. 2006; Krasny and Tidball 2015). Putnam and others also distinguished between bonding social capital among homogeneous individuals within groups and bridging social capital across people from different groups (Coffé and Geys 2007).

Whereas Lyda Hanifan focused on roads, Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom saw social capital as a prerequisite for communities working together to sustainably manage natural resources held in common, such as irrigation water or forests (Ahn and Ostrom 2003). She wanted to understand how communities overcome social
TABLE 13.1 Social capital definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR (YEAR, PAGE)</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hanifan (1916, 130, 131)</td>
<td>“Goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up a social unit,” which can be “directed towards the general improvement of the community well-being”</td>
<td>First use of the term “social capital”; emphasizes building social connections to motivate rural Americans to advocate for a public good</td>
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<td>Bourdieu (1986, 248)</td>
<td>“The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to . . . membership in a group”</td>
<td>Emphasizes individual benefits that come through social connections</td>
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<td>Coleman (1988, S98)</td>
<td>“A variety of different entities having two characteristics in common: They all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors . . . within the structure”</td>
<td>Emphasizes the function of social capital in close-knit groups as reinforcing positive social norms and thus conferring advantages on the group</td>
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<td>Putnam (1995, 67)</td>
<td>“Features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.” Can be bonding among people within a group or bridging between people in different groups.</td>
<td>Drawing from democratic traditions dating back to de Tocqueville’s work in the mid-1800s, emphasizes volunteer engagement in civic life, including clubs (e.g., Rotary), social recreational activities (e.g., bowling), and social welfare organizations (e.g., soup kitchens)</td>
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<td>Ahn and Ostrom (2008, 73)</td>
<td>“A set of prescriptions, values, and relationships created by individuals in the past that can be drawn on in the present and future to facilitate overcoming social dilemmas”</td>
<td>Used in explaining how communities cooperate to manage common resources sustainably and to avoid negative outcomes like the tragedy of the commons</td>
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dilemmas, or situations where each individual benefits from looking after his own interests, but the community as a whole suffers. For example, a social dilemma or “tragedy of the commons” occurs when any one fisherman catches as many fish as he can, which initially benefits him and his family. However, because the other fishermen are also exploiting the same lake, eventually overfishing leads to
environmental degradation and threatens all the fishermen’s livelihoods. Whereas external controls, such as regulations, incentives, and privatizing land, are one means to avert the tragedy of the commons, Ostrom and colleagues (2008) noted that when social capital is present, such top-down approaches are not needed for people to manage common resources sustainably.

**Why Is Social Capital Important?**

Unlike fear-based approaches to sustainability, where people comply because they fear potential reprimands or financial penalties, the social capital approach focuses on developing a genuine commitment to sustainable behaviors as the norm.

(Miller and Buys 2008, 246)

Communities with social capital are more willing to manage commonly held environmental resources, such as forests or water, sustainably and for the public good (Dietz et al. 2003; Ahn and Ostrom 2008). Social capital also has important implications for environmental education and youth development.

- Social capital offers a framework for environmental education that shifts the focus from changing individual behaviors to creating the conditions that enable a community to take collective action to safeguard its commonly held resources (Krasny, Kalbacker, et al. 2013).
- Social capital offers a framework for environmental education to play a role in ever more frequent and devastating disasters and other types of change (Krasny et al. 2011; DuBois et al. 2017). This is because communities with social capital are more resilient—that is, able to adapt and transform in the face of ongoing change and large disasters (Folke et al. 2002; Walker and Salt 2006; Plummer and FitzGibbon 2007; see also conclusion).
- Social capital has societal and youth development benefits (see chapter 14). Societies with higher levels of social capital tend to have lower crime rates, better performing civic institutions (Lochner et al. 1999), and better school performance (Coleman 1988). For youth, social capital is associated with reduced rates of teen pregnancy and delinquency, enhanced happiness and health, high-quality relationships with adults, and civil society skills such as the ability to run meetings (Bettertogether 2000; Lewis-Charp et al. 2003; Jarrett et al. 2005; Ferguson 2006; Helve and Bynner 2007; Rossteutscher 2008).
How Does Social Capital Contribute to Collective Action and Environmental Behaviors?

Social capital facilitates collective action by lowering the transaction costs and the risks of working together. I am more likely to spend time going to a meeting to advocate for a community solar farm if I trust that my neighbors will also show up. If community gardeners trust that their fellow gardeners are putting in their fair share of time weeding, they will be more likely to keep their own plots tidy and volunteer to weed the garden pathways and fix the garden fence. Importantly, people who trust each other don’t need to spend time monitoring others to make sure everyone is contributing a fair share of work; rather, they can simply engage in collective action for the public good (Dietz et al. 2003; Pretty 2003). Such collective action also builds social capital (figure 13.1).
Social capital can also foster environmental behaviors. Studies have shown that individuals with more social connections with neighbors, and those with strong connections with family members who practice green behaviors, are more likely to themselves practice environmental behaviors. This may be due to people learning about and seeing locally relevant examples of environmental behaviors from neighbors and family members, such as energy-saving tips and environmental groups they can join. People with strong connections also may become aware of ways to reduce the costs of environmental behaviors (e.g., learn about...
opportunities to carpool or join a solar collective), or feel pressure to conform with their neighbors’ or families’ green social norms (Miller and Buys 2008; Videras et al. 2012; Macias and Williams 2016; Cho and Kang 2017).

**How Can Environmental Education Nurture Social Capital?**

Environmental education can build social capital through fostering trust and social connections, and by setting norms of cooperation (see chapter 12). Strategies for building both in-group trust, as might occur when children learn to trust the other children and adults in their environmental program, and generalized trust, which refers to trusting people in society more abstractly, can be included in programs. Similarly, environmental education can build social connections within and outside a program. Trust and social connections within the program would be referred to as bonding social capital, whereas trust and social connections with other organizations are part of bridging social capital. Within-program or bonding social capital facilitates collective action among participants, whereas bridging social capital that includes people outside an environmental education program can enable students to engage in larger-scale collective actions (Krasny, Svendsen, et al. 2017; Stern and Hellquist 2017).

Several environmental education strategies can be used to build in-group trust among participants (McKenzie 2003; Ardoin, DiGiano, O’Connor, and Podkul 2016). In a residential program lasting from two and a half to five days, ten- and eleven-year-olds attributed the development of trusting relationships to being free from prescribed classroom roles, and to the program providing a safe space to take on different roles and to be supported in taking on new challenges. As they conquered physical challenges freed from classroom constraints and expectations about classroom learning, participants began to interact and offer support to peers, including students from their school with whom they had not previously interacted (Ardoin, DiGiano, O’Connor, and Podkul 2016). Succeeding in outdoor challenges, such as rock climbing and blindfolded “trust walks,” depends on cooperation with fellow participants and can similarly build trust.

Environmental action programs also create trusting relationships among participants, and between participants and program leaders through cooperative learning and team building as well as fun activities like going out for ice cream. Also important are open and honest communications and respect for multiple viewpoints during discussions about what actions to take. In addition, educators
wishing to build trust should demonstrate respect and caring for participants’ lives outside the actual program, while providing scaffolding for leadership and other challenging roles (Schusler and Krasny 2010; Stern and Hellquist 2017; Delia and Krasny 2018).

Environmental education programs are often conducted in cooperation with civil society organizations—like friends of parks groups, nature centers, YMCAs, 4-H programs, and environmental monitoring and stewardship organizations. In places where many civil society organizations exist, where they are perceived as being fair and effective, and where they have committed and engaged volunteers cooperating for the common good, generalized trust and social connections, or bridging social capital, are stronger. Thus, strategies to build bridging social capital include actively engaging participants in service learning, intergenerational activities, and voluntary associations conducting watershed monitoring, citizen science, tree planting, advocacy for renewable energy, and similar activities that involve multiple organizations (Ballantyne et al. 2006; Wollebaek and Selle 2007; Schusler and Krasny 2010; Thornton and Leahy 2012; Lindberg and Farkas 2016; Van Deth et al. 2016; Delia and Krasny 2018). In Poland, where citizens generally have low levels of trust, in part due to having lived under communist rule, secondary school students built trust with community members through interviewing elders and historians to learn about their villages’ multiethnic history and its past discrimination against Jews (Stefaniak et al. 2017). Finally, when parents come to their children’s final presentations or other events, they may also form social ties (Offer and Schneider 2007).

In short, to enhance trust among your participants, engage them in challenging cooperative activities, while setting norms of fairness and open communication and offering the scaffolding and support needed for the group to succeed. You may also want to include fun social activities to build social connections among youth in your group. To help students form trust and connections outside their group, or bridging social capital, provide meaningful ways to engage with the community, through service learning, intergenerational learning, and partnering with other environmental, community, and business groups.

**Assessing Social Capital**

Because social capital encompasses multiple dimensions, including in-group and generalized trust and social connections within and outside an environmental education program, you will want to specify your social-capital-related goals in planning your assessment. Does your program aim to increase levels of trust among participants, between participants and program leaders, and/or between
participants and community members? Are you concerned with students developing social ties where they share information and reinforce social norms? Are you interested in whether your program has motivated students to join civic groups in the future?

A scale designed to measure in-group trust among students before and after a program included items such as “How often do program participants keep promises?” “If you had a problem, would you go to a participant in this program?” and “If you had a problem, would you go to a leader in this program?” (Ardoin, DiGiano, O’Connor, and Podkul 2016). Generalized trust can be measured by items such as “I trust most people in my neighborhood,” or “In general, I can trust most people” (Krasny, Kalbacker, et al. 2013; see appendix).

To determine the strength of ties formed among students in your program, you can ask questions such as, “How often do you spend time with students in the program?” “How often do you communicate on social media with students in the program?” or “How well do you know students in the program?” If you were interested in knowing if your program increased bridging social capital, you might ask about how often program participants exchanged information with community members they met through the program.

Finally, an environmental education program might motivate students to expand their participation in voluntary associations. Here you might ask questions about what other volunteer, service learning, advocacy, or policy activities students have engaged in (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research 2000). If your program is short, students may not have an opportunity to increase these activities during your program. In this case, you might ask about students’ intentions to engage in these activities in the future; however, intending is not the same as actually doing something, so the results should be reported as intentions rather than actual changes in behavior. Alternatively, you can conduct surveys several months after a program has ended.